



Collaboration and Interactivity in EFL Learning via Blackboard Collaborate: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to report on a Blended Learning model which has been adopted by the researchers to teach EFL communication skills; listening and speaking, to undergraduate students in the Department of European Languages in King Abdulaziz University (KAU). This is the first study on the topic of Blended Learning in KAU immediately following the implementation of Blackboard Learn as the university LMS.

The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2014. The subjects were 17 female students enrolled in "Listening and Speaking 1". Due to the lack of essential listening and speaking interactive and collaborative activities in the assigned textbook, the instructors decided to design and deliver a Blended course via Blackboard Learn in order to expose the students to English language outside the classroom, to encourage their interaction and collaboration on course related topics and activities, essentially to motivate their learning and improve their performance.

The course was divided into five units, each includes one listening and one speaking activity aligned with a course learning outcome. The students were guided through the activity which was fully explained with examples. A drill application for practice followed to reinforce understanding. Finally, the students were requested to respond to an on-line listening quiz and complete a speaking task as assessments. The researchers utilized selected LMS tools which were supportive of the pedagogical model which they adopted. A survey was given to the learners at the end of the semester to give their feedback towards using the Blackboard LMS in the course. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted in the study in order to find out the significance of using blackboard in EFL.

The results indicate the advantages of using Blackboard Learn in EFL learning. The respondents pointed out that their Listening skills have improved. Moreover, the results show that the respondents are uncertain whether their speaking skills have improved or not. The advantages highlighted by the respondents include the easy access of course material, Blackboard not being complicated to use, and effectiveness of using computers rather than the traditional use of exam sheets or books. The limitations and drawbacks of Blended Learning highlighted by the respondents are followed by a number of practical suggestions such as, solving technical problems, providing proper training to students, increasing the number of labs, and recognizing excellent performance of both instructors and students.

The continuous vast developments in educational technology and information systems have greatly influenced and facilitated the exchange of information and the spread of knowledge beyond the walls of brick-and-mortar classrooms. The institutions of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have started to approach this massive transformation by rethinking its pedagogies, experimenting with online learning approaches and teaching strategies, and renovating delivery models. The distance education model that has been introduced in most universities in KSA is now supplemented with Blended Learning models, which will contribute to enhancing these universities' e-learning offerings and provisions. Blended Learning offers wide varieties of tools for instructors and students to exchange and widen their knowledge as well as to interact and collaborate outside the regular classrooms. In EFL classrooms, as in the present study, the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) was used to facilitate the improvement of students' linguistic skills with an emphasis on listening comprehension and oral production, to expose the students to the target language outside the classroom, and to encourage their interactions and collaborations on activities related to the course.

1. Review of Literature

1.1. What is Blended Learning?

The implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning



processes have contributed to the rise of innovative methods of teaching and learning. One of the most popular e-learning models is blended learning, which is defined by many scholars as a learning model which combines traditional face-to-face (FtF) instruction and computer assisted learning (CAL) (Nemeir, 2005) or computer-mediated instruction (Graham, 2004). Traditional FtF instruction comprises interactions between instructors and learners that take place in the classroom. On the other hand; computer-mediated instruction uses (ICT) to mediate the learning experience and interactions between the instructors and learners without requiring them to be in the same place. It facilitates more learning and collaborations for learners outside the regular classrooms. Lynch and Dembo (2004) point out that blended learning represents an eclectic blend of technologies and modalities which enable both synchronous and asynchronous teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions in a single course or program.

1. 2. Why Blend?

Many instructors, in recent years have adopted the blended learning model. Some educators have been concerned with integrating technology into the classroom and speculating about the amount of blending involved. The most cited advantage of blended learning is that it improves teaching and learning strategies (Dziuban, Hartman, Moskal, 2004; Adam and Deon Nel, 2009). Singh and Reed (2001) have found out that blended learning helps in learning effectiveness; extending the reach; improving development cost and time; optimizing business results. Sharma and Barrett (2007) also highlight the advantage of cost-saving of blended learning since travelling and attending classes are not required. In addition, they emphasize the convenience of blended learning courses which allow learners to study anywhere according to the time they want.

Graham (2003) also has suggested six reasons for using the blended model: pedagogical richness; access to knowledge; social interaction; learner's capability to control and choose; cost effectiveness; and ease of revision.

Hockly (2011) has added three new causes for employing blending learning. Due to technological innovations nowadays, learners expect technology to be integrated into their classes. They also expect to be able to fit learning into their busy lives. In addition some education directives—in some contexts—expect teachers to offer blended learning options.

Marsh (2012) has listed the common advantages of blended learning. Blended learning is found to:

- provide a more individualized learning experience
- provide more personalized learning support
- support and encourage independent and collaborative learning between learners
- increase learner engagement in learning
- adapt many different learning styles
- provide a place to practice the target language beyond the classroom
- provide a less stressful practice environment for the target language
- provide flexibility of studying to meet learners' needs
- help learners develop the necessary learning skills for the twenty-first

1. 3. Blackboard as a Learning Management System

Blackboard is one of the most popular course management systems for classroom and online educational assistance. It has become the dominant e-learning software company nowadays. Instructors and learners may benefit from the Blackboard Learning Management System in many ways (Bradford et al. 2007). It provides easy access to all course materials anytime anywhere. Therefore, the students can retrieve the course materials and submit assignments once complete. Blackboard provides two types of feedback to students: faculty-initiated feedback in response to students' assignments and automated feedback using Blackboard's Test Manager function for quizzes and exams. Blackboard includes several features that allow for constant communications between instructors and students. They can communicate through announcements, discussions, virtual classroom, and email. The instructors can also track student usage of courses and posts these results in the course statistics area. They can obtain statistics on all students or individual students within the course. Using Blackboard help in promoting some skills like organization and time management, which assist students carry out their assignments efficiently.



1.4. Blending Learning in KAU

The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has encouraged the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) for teaching and learning in higher education institutions. The current trend is towards blending face-to-face with online instruction when developing new educational processes. King Abdulaziz University (KAU), established the Deanship of E-Learning and Distance Education that provides assistance to instructors in developing interactive, web-based supplementary materials for traditional courses. The KAU is the first Saudi university that employed a virtual learning environment to offer Bachelor degrees through Distance learning. KAU has recently implemented Blackboard Learn as the university LMS in 2013.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2014. The aim of this study is to report on a Blended Learning model which was adopted by the researchers to teach EFL communication skills; listening and speaking, to undergraduate students in the Department of European Languages in King Abdulaziz University (KAU). This is the first study on the topic of Blended Learning in KAU immediately following the implementation of Blackboard Learn as the university LMS.

2.1. Subjects

The subjects were 17 female students enrolled in “Listening and Speaking 1,” a compulsory course in the Department of European Languages’ Program Plan which is offered to students enrolled in third level. The Level of the students enrolled in this level take Beginner-Level courses in Writing, Reading and Listening and Speaking. The aim is to prepare them for the specialized courses in the coming levels. They usually come with a beginner or intermediate level English proficiency and require constant support and engagement. This particular group of learners had never taken an online course before, so they were trained on using the system prior to conducting the study.

2.2. The Blended Course

Due to the lack of essential listening and speaking interactive and collaborative activities in the assigned textbook, the instructors decided to design and deliver a Blended course via the Blackboard LMS in order to expose the students to English language practice opportunities outside the classroom, to encourage their interaction and collaboration on course related topics and activities, essentially to motivate their learning and improve their performance.

The course was divided into five units, each includes one listening and one speaking activity aligned with a course learning outcome. The students were guided through the activity which was fully explained with examples. A drill application for practice followed to reinforce understanding. Finally, the students were requested to respond to an on-line listening quiz and complete a speaking task as assessments. The researchers utilized selected LMS tools that were supportive of the pedagogical model which they adopted.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

An end-of-course survey was used to collect students’ input on their satisfaction with the online component of the course. The survey consisted of items that inquired about students’ computer and Internet literacy, language skills, overall rating of the Blackboard experience, and Blackboard features and tools. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted in order to find out the significance of using Blackboard Learn in EFL.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Computer and Internet Literacy and Accessibility

The researchers included questions regarding the students’ computer and Internet literacy and accessibility in order to comprehend their effects on the students’ Blackboard learning experience. The computer skills of the students, according to the survey, varied between excellent and very good. The aim of including such items is to relate students’ computer skill to their Blackboard learning experience. The statistics present that the students didn’t have much difficulties concerning the LMS and this is due to their excellent, very good computer and Internet skills.



3.2. Language Skills

Among the various language skills, the students rated their listening skills the highest improved with a (52.9%) percent for strongly agree followed by a (64.7%) agree for improved reading skills. Moreover, most of the students responded to (agree) on the improvement of other language skills such as writing, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Speaking skills, however, falls within the (undecided) response category by the students. This fact indicates that the researchers/instructors must reconsider enhancing the tools, content, and features by which students can grasp the extent to which their speaking skills have improved.

3.3. Overall Rating of the Blackboard Learning Experience

The responses of the participants indicated that they feel more confident when they use English online rather than using it in the class ($p=3.05$), using Blackboard helps them to develop knowledge of computer and internet ($p=3.01$), using Blackboard helps them working according to their own pace ($p=2.47$), using Blackboard improves communication between students and teachers ($p=2.23$), and it gives them access to authentic second language materials outside the classroom ($p=2.20$). The rest of the questions showed no significance in the section of rating the students' Blackboard experience.

3.4. Blackboard Features, tools and Content Rating and Frequency

Through evaluating the features, tools, and content of the designed blended course, the students revealed varied responses. (52.9%) of the students strongly agreed that they found the content of the course easily. Nine out of the seventeen students (52.9%) disagreed that they did not know how to use the Blackboard tools. Furthermore, seven students (41.2%) disagreed that they needed more training with the tools and features. As for the tests taken online, ten of the students (58.8%) strongly agreed that they were easy to answer, and (35.3%) of them strongly agreed that they had no technical problems during the tests. Seven students (41.2%) agreed that they got good grades in online activities. Regarding the ease of using the voice tool, the students chose the undecided category. This can be explained by the fact that the voice tool was not used frequently and the students were required to submit speaking tasks in the class.

Among all the tools, 'tests' (100%), 'forums' (94,1%), 'assignments' (41,2%) and 'voice tools' (35.3%) are the ones used actively by the participants while 'group', 'Wiki', 'blog', 'chat', 'email', and 'journal' are the ones which were never used by the participants. Therefore, the statistics clearly demonstrates that the number of the tools ($n=4$) that the students actively used is less than the number of the tools ($n=6$) that they did not use frequently.

3.5. Limitations of Using Blackboard

The highest rated limitation of using Blackboard according to the students' questionnaires was the problem of slow Internet connectivity. This finding must be taken into consideration as it is highly rated by a high number of students ($n=10$). It also suggests that King Abdulaziz University must consider supporting a high speed Internet connection prior to introducing such a technology to the students. Moreover, answers to the open-ended question concerning the limitations were supporting the preceding limitation.

The remaining limitations of Blackboard were less significant. However, it is worth mentioning that the highest number of the students disagreed on four statements; using Blackboard is difficult and frustrating, easy to cheat on tests submitted online, and the instructions provided for online materials are difficult to follow, and being socially isolated when using Blackboard.

Furthermore, the highest number of the students was indecisive whether they prefer face-to-face interaction with teacher and other students than using Blackboard. The result is due to the short period of time of using Blackboard Learn (a semester). However, if the students are more exposed to Blended courses, they are going to be more definite in their preferences concerning Blackboard and face-to-face interaction.

3.6. Suggestions

As for the suggestions, the participants were divided into two groups concerning their opinion about increasing the number of online courses in the department. The first group (35.3%) agreed while the other group (35.3%) was indecisive about the increasing. Moreover, a high number of the students (41.2%) agreed that they should get training to use Blackboard Learn. However, there is a contradiction here as



the students strongly agreed that using Blackboard is easy and flexible. The main reason behind this might be the confusion the students felt towards the new technology introduced to them. The students also stated that more language labs should be provided for online learning (58.8%), and more credits should be given to students who work distinguishably via Blackboard (41.2%). These suggestions should be taken into consideration and application. For the open-ended questions, most of the students chose not to give any suggestions. As for the students who did, they suggested better Internet connections and better language labs.

4. Conclusion

The present study investigates insights about Blended Learning model in teaching EFL communication skills; listening and speaking, in the Department of European Languages in King Abdulaziz University (KAU). A survey was given to the students at the end of the semester to give their feedback towards using the Blackboard LMS in the course. A statistical analysis is carried out in order to find out the significance of using blackboard in EFL. The survey is composed of sections and a number of questions for each section, e.g., section on the rating, section on the limitations, etc. The answers of the questions were mostly the five-point Likert scale items and some open-ended questions. The results indicated that tools such as, forums, tests, assignments and voice tools are frequently used while some important tools such as emails, journals, and blogs were never used. The results indicate the advantages of using Blackboard Learn in EFL learning. The respondents pointed out that their Listening skills have improved. Moreover, the results show that the respondents are uncertain whether their speaking skills have improved or not. The advantages highlighted by the respondents include the easy access of course material, Blackboard not being complicated to use, and effectiveness of using computers rather than the traditional use of exam sheets or books. The limitations and drawbacks of Blended Learning highlighted by the respondents are followed by a number of practical suggestions such as, solving technical problems, providing proper training to students, increasing the number of labs, and recognizing excellent performance of both instructors and students.

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